

A Reply to Mr. Roy Piepenburg

Some months ago, THE NATIVE PEOPLE, a paper published in Edmonton, Alberta, had printed, in four sections, an article entitled: «Indian Education in Alberta, as I viewed it», article written by Mr. Roy Piepenburg, a former officer of the Indian Affairs Branch, Education Division. Mr. Roy Piepenburg was involved last year in the dispute between the people of Fort Chipewyan, the Indian Affairs Branch and the Provincial Department of Education. In his article Mr. Piepenburg is very critical of the role of the Catholic Church in Canada and of the missionaries in the education of Indians in the province of Alberta.

Here now is the answer to Mr. Piepenburg by Father J.E.Y. Levaque, O.M.I., Director of the Oblate Indian-Eskimo Council.

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Mr. Piepenburg gave one side of the story of the role of the Catholic Church and the missionaries in the education of Indians in Alberta. I believe that in the interest of justice another view should be presented to the readers THE NATIVE PEOPLE. As a strong proponent of democracy, Mr. Piepenburg will surely not object to another side being given a hearing.

I don't intend to pull any punches. He told it as he sees it. I'll tell it as I see it.

In the first place: his prejudice against religion stinks. His statement made to the contrary cannot stifle the smell of his attitude towards the Church: and the Roman Catholic Church particularly. No matter what the Church did or does, or what the missionaries do, Mr. P. (abbreviation for Mr. Piepenburg), interprets it as evidence of greed and contempt for the Indians.

What is most astonishing is how he twists the Church's position on the Government's integration policy. I would like to make very clear here, what that position is. The Church is not against integration as such. The Church objects to the timing and the manner in which the policy was carried out. From the point of view of timing, integration has to be a gradual process, not a wholesale, overnight change-over. Furthermore, the parents should be able to freely decide and not be intimidated, bribed, deceived or coerced by Department officers into sending their children off the Reserve. Lastly, the parents should have a choice; not between a poorly built, poorly equipped Federal school and a modern, well-equipped town school; but a *real choice*: between two good schools. The Church's objection to the Department's program of integration is based on these three points.

Mr. P. states that the policy was a mistake and the manner in which it was carried out was a violation of the Indian rights. He decries the fact that the Indians didn't know what their rights were, and meekly accepted even the closing of their schools. And who was there to tell them what their rights were? It was not Mr Piepenburg. It was the voice of the bishops and the missionaries which was raised. If it had been any other voice, Mr. P. might have understood, but because it came from the Church it was a horror.

If there was a cold war, as Mr. P. describes it, it was because the missionaries were telling the parents what they could demand. The last few years have

proved they were right, and the Indians have rejected the effort to thrust them into provincial schools by wholesale and hasty integration. They have justified the support that the Church gave them. Mr. P. probably met this opposition himself, when he was closing schools, and has not been able to shake off his personal feeling about it.

Missionaries' long-time interest

Certainly the missionaries have an interest in the Indians. For the past 100 years they have lived with, and worked with and loved the Indians. They have established schools and financed them out of Church money, long before the Government or anyone else would give a dime. The « lucrative grants » which these schools finally got under the per capita system amounted to peanuts compared to the amount paid to integrate a child in the public school system. *There is not one school I know that profited financially.* Anything that was available was put back into the school, and countless other things were supplied out of the Church funds, long before the Department furnished these for the Indian schools.

We don't need Mr. P. to tell us that the Indians have a right to equal educational facilities on the Reserve. Long before he breathed the air of Indian Affairs the missionaries **were fighting...** and I use the **word intentionally...**, to get decent buildings, lighting, **books**, equipment, teachers.

Right here I want to say a word about teachers in the Catholic schools. In any district where recruiting was properly taken care of by the Department officials, qualified Catholic teachers were available. It is expecting quite a bit to try to get any kind of good teacher when recruiting is left until August or September. It is very easy then to blame the Church, again, instead of putting the blame where it belongs, on the recruiting officer. I found a good lesson in one of the articles in the December issue of *The Native People*. It was the account

of the dismissal from the Goodfish Lake Day School of two *highly qualified* teachers because of immoral activities. « It is not because of their inability to teach but it's the way they regard the people of this community... They are crazy. They don't even respect themselves when they are in public ». (This is a quote taken from the article). Being qualified to teach Indian children means a lot more than having degrees and diplomas. I have seen some of those nuns of whom Mr. P. speaks with such sarcasm, who would take little primary age children for special help in reading and arithmetic after school hours and on Saturdays. I have seen them spend their spare time going on walks with the children, preparing plays and teaching them crafts. Perhaps it was his misfortune to encounter a few of the less perfect, but it is **certainly** unfair for him to generalize and cast a shadow over all of the nuns who are in Indian schools.

When he accuses the missionaries of paternalism and subjugating the Indians, he is in reality insulting the majority of Indians who are Catholic and appreciate what the missionaries have done. It is hardly a compliment for them to be told that they have been led around by the nose all these years.

Mr. P.'s ideas about priests hanging onto the schools because they are such a soft touch shows how much he knows about running a school. His ideas about the Oblates and the office in Ottawa are astonishing. To believe him, the office in Ottawa was just created during the last five years to answer the crisis of the closure of residential schools. Nothing happened before 1964, apparently, at which time Mr. P. stepped on the scene. It is hard to believe that an educated man could so grossly misinterpret a piece of honest research, such as that done on the psychology of the Indian people. His inferences that the Oblates used it to humiliate the Indians are so wrong that any points he tries to prove by stating that it was the basis for residential school policy will only fall flat. It is simply not true.

SCHOOL COMMITTEES

In the years that I was in southern Alberta, which coincided with the years Mr. P. was in northern Alberta, I never saw him once on the Blood Reserve. Yet he speaks as if he knows all about the school committees of the South, and the « very little liaison between the Department », and about the nursery-kindergarten building, and about the « ugly political tentacles of the religious missionary community ». What does he know about it?

In justice to the dozens of Blood Indians who worked on a School Committee that brought much pressure to bear so as to get things for their children, and did lots of good for their school — even in the B.P. years (Before Piepenburg) — and whose voice was ignored in the nursery-kindergarten deal, I am going to tell it as it really was.

The School Committee of the Blood Reserve voted for a kindergarten to be built *on the Reserve*, repeat... **ON THE RESERVE!** They didn't need help from the priests to see that the money for the education of Indian children — their children — was being poured into the public school systems in all the towns around the Reserve, while their children on the Reserve were in a firetrap primary school block that had been condemned after the last war. The existing kindergarten was in the dark and damp basement of the church, while two others were in equally make-shift accommodations.

These parents didn't need the priest to tell them something was radically wrong: and it is an insult, as I said before, for Mr. P. to repeat and repeat that Blood Indian parents were « sandwich makers » and didn't know what was going on and didn't do anything about it. I refer Mr. P. the December issue of the *Kainai News*, page 2, where he will find a story which is headed: **INDIANS EXPRESS FEAR OF SCHOOLS OFF THE RESERVE.** A Blood Indian Band councillor

states that plans to have a kindergarten on the Reserve «aren't getting anywhere». And these parents have been fighting for their own kindergarten for years.

Their School Committee, which represents the majority of the parents on the Reserve, took their resolution to the Band Council, who in turn approved it and sent the request to Edmonton and Ottawa. This was not the priests, it was the Indian people. Mr. P. isn't telling much which wasn't already suspected when he writes: «Department people felt that as long as the education committee were under the sway of the religious people, it was not a favorable climate in which to resolve matters as important as the building site for the half-million dollar nursery-kindergarten complex which is to be built in Cardston. So the Committee was politely ignored while high-speed negotiations were consummated with the Cardston School Division». I am going to make two remarks about that:

1. Mr.P's very vague «Department people» were hardly aware of the «climate» of 40 years during which religious people knew enough to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars of Church money for buildings, teacherages, paying teachers' salaries, supplying equipment, etc., etc.

The shame is that the town school system, which is as much under the sway of religious people as any denominational school, should receive Indian money against the wishes of the majority of Indian parents, to enlarge their school, while the schools on the Reserve are rotting away, and the majority of Indian parents want their Reserve schools.

In the same issue of *Kainai News* referred to above, there is an article on the front page which announces the completion of the \$1,150,000 Elementary School in Cardston. The negotiations were certainly high-speed, and fulfilled the dream of the Cardston School Division, which «fought tooth

and nail for the past five years for a much-needed elementary school ». But Indian parents, who fought longer and harder, « aren't getting anywhere ». What was that about « political tentacles »?

2. Mr. P. thinks the Indian parents on the Cardston building-planning committee represented the Reserve families. He is dead wrong. There were in actual fact only a handful of selected families who were there by private invitation only, with no public meeting announced on the Reserve. These people were not part of any School Committee.

When Mr. P. uses such phrases as « ugly political tentacles » and « dictatorial policies », is he trying to tell the Indians that the missionaries who have been on their Reserves for the past 100 years are avaricious and scheming and greedy and hateful??? Has Mr. P. ever followed a missionary around the Reserve in his pick-up truck? Has he ever seen any priests grabbing the money out of the Indians' pockets to fill the overflowing collection plate? What does Mr. P. really know about Christianity or the Church?

ABORTIVE PROTEST AT FORT CHIPEWYAN

« Consider the abortive protest which took place at Fort Chipewyan last June » he writes. Yes, Mr. P., let us consider it. Mr. P. was sent there to represent the Department of Indian Affairs to study the problem between the Bishop Piche School and the Northland School Division. At that meeting the Indian and Metis people were unanimous in wanting their school removed from the Northland School Division. Mr. P. publicly stated that it was the duty of the Department to respect the manifest will of the parents. Yet, when Mr. Piepenburg returned to Edmonton, he played god and took it upon himself to decide that this was not the true voice of the people. In the report he wrote to Ottawa he erroneously stated that agreement had

been reached, or some compromise arrived at, thus aborting the protest of the Indian and Metis parents of Fort Chipewyan. This smells of dictatorial power and manipulating, reminiscent of the «Department people» of the Cardston nursery-kindergarten affair, and doesn't go down any better, because he tosses off a few soulsearching questions. What is even more despicable: he lays the blame on the Department, who acted on his advice, and on the clergy for being on the side of the parents. My information on the above incident is well documented with correspondance from Ottawa and eye-witness accounts.

SCHOOLS OFF THE RESERVE

It should be pointed out that there are no «neutral» schools. In this day and age the children in public school are exposed to every kind of idea and influence. The «Christian» materialism that permeates our society today is propagated in the public school system.

I personally know Indian parents who are aware of this, without any advice from me. They do not want their children mixed up in that kind of atmosphere. If Mr. P. cannot take my word for it, I refer him to the KAINAI NEWS, December issue. In the article on page 2, INDIANS EXPRESS FEARS OF SCHOOLS OFF THE RESERVE, a Blood Indian Band councillor said that Blood Indian parents are «scared» to have their children educated off the Reserve because of the social problems in white society. He said, and I quote, «I'm scared about LSD and other bad habits. They're being brought on the Reserve (through off-reserve education). If we had schools on the Reserve we could manage on our own».

It has yet to be proven that «the best schools» are the town schools. Better men than Mr. P. are questioning the whole public school system, and if Mr. P. is so naive as to believe otherwise, it is he who be-

longs back in « medieval » times. Yet instead of giving the missionary credit for some good judgment, Mr. P. blames him for « frustrating Indians' efforts to let their children attend the best school available, be they R.C. or neutral ».

This is an example of the kind of thinking that Mr. P. has devoted to his subject. To give the readers an example of another kind of distorted reasoning, I will cite the incident he describes of the school principal standing on the steps of the residence turning away Indian parents. Mr. P. suggests that this is not justified under any circumstances... anywhere. He bases his judgment and condemnation on that opinion. I do not know the particular circumstances of that situation, and I doubt very much if Mr. P. knows any more than he told, but I suggest that there are circumstances which would justify what the Principal did. The child could have been sick in bed with 104 degree temperature. Again, some children are not under the care of their parents, and are placed in the residence for special family reasons. The principal could be told by the lawful guardian, a grandmother, for example, or the Child Welfare officer, not to allow the child to go with any but designated persons, etc., etc. These have all happened, and I know what I am talking about. It's necessary to keep a clear head about « rights » and « duties ». There are several examples in Mr. P.'s articles where this distinction is not made. I suggest that he does more harm than good by such cockeyed reasoning.

Mr. Piepenburg gives the impression that the priests and nuns control enrollment in the residences. This is absolutely false. The Department is the recruiting agent, and not one principal, much less a nun, has any authority to admit children. In the light of fact, Mr. Piepenburg's accusations of holding children prisoner year after year until confirmation age, are ridiculous.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Piepenburg implies that his conscience could not allow him to go on in the Department, yet he managed to last for five years. What I find hard to understand is if he really, sincerely rejected Department policy on integration, for example, why he could not recognize as sincere those outside the Department who found fault with the policy and its implementation. When he was part of the Establishment that was the time to stand up and be counted, or make some kind of sound to indicate he was an independent thinker. His own description in the articles of the process of integration in Alberta, describes the very tragedy of disintegration, complete with drop-outs, frustration and resentment. Yet he evidently did all he could, as part of the Establishment, and was very successful, if we believe what he says, in silencing that echo of « Integration is disintegration » in the Indian Communities.

From my personal remembrance of the Alberta Indian Affairs Department, I have no recollection of Mr. Piepenburg as a crusader for the Indian cause. I certainly rejoice if he has seen the light, but I do object that from his new arrogant height he blasts people who have been sincerely and disinterestedly involved in the Indian cause long before he arrived (and will be long after he goes). It seems that he has an axe to grind and does not care where it falls.

One of the last remarks Mr. Piepenburg makes in the November installment is that the Alberta social climate is « prejudice-laden ». May I say that Mr. Piepenburg's biased view of the work of the Church and his ignorance about the attitude of the Indians towards integration can do little to better the situation.

(Rev.) J.E.Y. Levaque, O.M.I.
Director
Oblate Indian-Eskimo Council
238 Argyle
Ottawa 4, Ont.

Que nous sommes misérables, Seigneur, d'avoir
perdu cette unique richesse notre abîme et notre
source, la faute qui nous ouvrait sur ta miséricorde
sans fond!

pourtant la sourde imminence du mal est respirable
comme une avalanche à cet excès de raison qui nous
serre l'instant avant que le grand frisson se dé-
clanche.

Si tout s'effondre, que cela fasse un vrai trou!
Un gouffre pour y enraciner notre cœur!
Que notre bouche vers Toi reste ouverte, fût-elle
emplie du gravat des paroles.

Jacob, de Pierre Emmanuel